

We must not abandon the Afghan people

During the past two decades – despite the armed conflict – Afghanistan has achieved great progress. The infant mortality rate has decreased from 90,2 per 1000 live births to 46,5. The number of children enrolled in schools has increased from 3.8 million in 2003 to 6.3 million by 2017. Maternal mortality has dropped with 50 percent. This progress is due to hard work by Afghanistan and its local communities with the support of development aid.

The war-torn country is now at a crossroads as Afghanistan enters a critical stage towards intra-Afghan talks and a future peace deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Meanwhile, the level of violence remains high and challenges are growing.

Covid-19 has put an economic strain on Afghan communities, especially the most vulnerable. For conflict and displacement-affected communities and others in acute humanitarian need, the socio-economic shocks of the pandemic have left families and communities struggling to cope. The World Bank expects GDP to contract by between 5.5 and 7.4 percent in 2020. Increased food prices of more than 5 percent and an economic recession will push millions of Afghans into poverty. According to the World Bank, poverty levels may increase to 72 percent of the Afghan population because of the pandemic. UN OCHA estimates that 18 million Afghans will be in need in 2021.

Climate change adds to the many burdens of the Afghan people, impacting the livelihoods of millions of rural Afghans, forcing more people to leave their homes, and exacerbating the effects of conflict.

On November 23-24, the Afghan government and the international community will meet for a high-level conference on Afghanistan. The event comes at a critical time.

International leaders are expected to pledge their continued support for the development of Afghanistan. As the Government and donors consider their priorities for the coming years, political gains and the uncertainty of long-term international support risks leaving the Afghan people behind.

Afghanistan has come far over the past 20 years, but there is still a long way to go. The country remains largely dependent on international aid to provide basic services to its people. If we stop or scale back our support now, amidst escalating conflict, skyrocketing humanitarian needs, and an economic recession that will push millions more into poverty, the hard-earned gains for Afghans, especially women and children, may be lost. Extreme poverty is concentrated in countries that suffer from crisis and conflict, and Afghanistan is at risk of being left behind in the efforts to fulfil the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

At the upcoming high-level conference on Afghanistan, we urge all international partners to put the Afghan people at the centre, most of whom live in rural and hard-to-reach communities. It is the Afghan people and the local communities who will underpin a sustainable peace in Afghanistan, and who will suffer the most if it fails.

To make a difference to the Afghan people, future cooperation should prioritise:

- Protection of human rights, including women's, girls', minorities', and other vulnerable groups' enjoyment of those rights. This includes access to education and health care as well as creating meaningful spaces for Afghan people to make their voices heard.

- Support to Afghan civil society groups and individuals in a way that strengthens their long-term development and independence. Promote conditions for organisations to work effectively with impartiality to reach those in need. Without the support of national and international NGOs, it will be impossible for Afghanistan to reach the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Protection of free speech and the freedom of association. Media and civil society in Afghanistan are increasingly under attack, endangering years of progress as those who have the potential for changing Afghanistan from below are being silenced or forced to flee the country.
- Support the voices of local communities, civil society, women and youth in the peace process. Human rights, including the rights of women, girls and minorities must be non-negotiable in the peace process. Equal access to quality social services, rule of law and employment opportunities, in particular for young Afghans, must also be ensured to address the drivers of conflict at local levels.
- Finally, ensure accountability and improve transparency as preconditions for further support. The prevention of corruption and misuse of funds is a responsibility that must be prioritized at all levels, by the Afghan government and by international partners.

The numerous challenges in terms of security, economy, political stability, environment and public health make the future of Afghanistan extremely unpredictable. This makes the need for of long-term solidarity, and the continuation of strong financial and technical support to Afghanistan more pressing than ever before.

Signatories:

Swedish Committee for Afghanistan

British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG)

Norwegian Afghanistan Committee

Danish Refugee Council

Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO)

Cordaid

Norwegian Refugee Council

Oxfam in Afghanistan

DACAAR

Christian Aid

Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (CSPPS)

Norwegian Church Aid

ZOA

Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & development (ACBAR)

WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform